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House to discuss fact CIA has uncovered no illicit arms

Washington (AP) — The CIA's 18-month-old covert action to prevent arms from reaching leftist Salvadoran guerrillas has failed to capture a single weapons shipment, officials say. But its supporters contend the effort has succeeded anyway by disrupting supply lines.

The degree of success achieved by the Central Intelligence Agency's support for Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries operating from Honduras is likely to be a central issue in a closed-door House debate today. The debate's focus will be a bill to end covert aid and to replace it with an \$80 million open fund to help governments friendly to the United States stop alleged leftist gun-running in the region.

In interviews with officials familiar with the covert action, opinions on its worth varied sharply.

"When we used to have our interdiction outside of Nicaragua, they [CIA officials] could show us what we were interdicting — and it made sense," said Senator David F. Durenberger (R, Minn.) a critic on the Senate Intelligence Committee. "They'd show you how they'd captured these trucks.

"Now that they're inside the place, they can't show you what they're interdicting because I don't think they're interdicting anything — maybe because they [the Nicaraguans] aren't shipping anything."

Several other officials said the CIA has been unable to present to congressional oversight committees evidence of any weapons shipment captured since the Nicaraguan covert action was authorized by President Reagan in December, 1981.

One official said that CIA director William J. Casey once told the House Intelligence Committee that the covert action had cut the weapons shipments by 60 percent, but Mr. Casey was quickly challenged on the claim.

Supporters of the covert action contend that deterring shipments — not capturing weapons — is the purpose of interdiction. They say the program has put pressure on the Sandinista government to halt its alleged aid to Salvadoran guerrillas.

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"It has given the Sandinistas some pause in what they're doing," said Representative G. William Whitehurst (R, Va.) a House Intelligence Committee member. "They're feeling heat. . . . Nicaragua should not be a privileged Marxist sanctuary."

"Those who try to quantify interdiction based on counting captured arms supply do not understand the term," wrote Representative C. W. Bill Young (R, Fla.). "What they are saying is like asking a man who takes his vitamins every day how many colds he prevented last year."

An administration official said covert action has forced Nicaraguans and Salvadoran rebels to abandon mountain routes through Honduras and shift instead to light airplanes, boats and more difficult land routes along the Honduran Pacific Coast.

"I don't think it entered anybody's mind when we embarked on our effort 18 months ago that we would capture weapons," he said. "The main point is that it brings pressure on the Sandinistas to cut it out."

He also said that weapons which had been destined for Salvadoran guerrillas now were needed by the Nicaraguan army to fight the growing army of CIA-backed "contras," or counterrevolutionaries.

In addition, he said new U.S. radar equipment, including AWACS radar-warning planes, has cut the use of light planes. According to the official, the Soviet Union has been notifying Nicaragua when U.S. radar is not in use in order to permit some flights.

He said that a team of Salvadoran guerrillas was intercepted this year in the Honduran lowlands near the Pacific Ocean, and according to the administration official, documents captured from them showed that infiltration routes had shifted away from the mountains where the contras are most active.

Despite the listing of arms interdiction as the initial purpose of the covert action, critics have suspected that another goal was to oust the Sandinista government, which came to power in 1979 after overthrowing the

longtime dictator and U.S. ally, Gen. Anastasio Somoza Debayle.

That concern led Congress to pass the Boland Amendment, named for Representative Edward P. Boland (D, Mass.), House Intelligence Committee chairman, in December, 1982. It bars U.S. aid "for the purpose" of overthrowing the Sandinistas or provoking war between Nicaragua and Honduras.

President Reagan repeatedly has denied that the United States is trying to oust the Sandinistas, although he has referred to contras as "freedom fighters." Administration officials recently talked about pressuring the Sandinistas into holding elections and reducing what the U.S. administration called internal repression.

Some critics cite the dramatic growth of the contra army — from 500 to an estimated 10,000 men in 18 months — and public declarations by some of its leaders that they intend to overthrow the Sandinistas as evidence that the administration is violating the Boland Amendment.